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ABSTRACT

Whole language is an approach to, or attitude toward learning that sees language as a whole entity, and writing, speaking, reading, and listening should be integrated when learned. It is not a teaching method. Each whole language teacher implements the theories of whole language as he or she sees fit for a particular class. Whole language techniques help both children and adults learn a second language much in the same way they learned their first languages. Whole language activities in the elementary whole language classroom include individual and small group reading and writing activities, ungraded dialogue journals, writing portfolios, writing conferences, and student-made books. Much research also demonstrates the effectiveness of the whole language approach in adult ESL classrooms. The whole language approach is an attractive approach to adults for several reasons: adults respond well to a classroom environment that asks them to actually do something; adults look for a purpose or usefulness in a lesson; whole language activities are applicable to daily life; and the materials used in whole language are authentic, not contrived for the lesson. While no approach to teaching is foolproof, the whole language approach has successfully created readers, writers, and language users in a variety of classroom environments. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Principles of Whole Language and Implications for ESL Learners

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In his book, Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose (1989) describes his experience teaching English to war veterans in downtown Los Angeles. The men he taught came from a variety of backgrounds and most had remedial academic histories and little success in traditional classrooms. Through this and other experiences teaching English, Rose reformed his idea of how a reading and writing curriculum should be designed:

> It seemed that, if anything, concentrating on the particulars of language--schoolbook grammar, mechanics, usage--would tremendously restrict the scope of what language use was all about. Such approaches would rob writing of its joy, and would, to boot, drag the veterans back through their dismal history of red-pencilled failure . . . My students needed to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers (Rose, 1989, p. 143).

Rose learned that effective teaching goes beyond workbook pages and spelling lists. His students learned language through using language. They were inquirers and authors. They focused on meaning, not on grammatical correctness. These concepts are some of the foundations of whole language philosophy.

Whole language is an approach to learning that sees language as a whole entity, and writing, speaking, reading, and listening should be integrated when learned. In whole language, learning is built upon the real experiences and background knowledge of the learner. This paper will discuss the components of whole language philosophy and its appropriateness for child and adult learners of English as a second language (ESL). I will also provide examples of whole language approaches used in ESL classrooms.

What is Whole Language?

As stated earlier, whole language in an approach or attitude toward learning, not a teaching method. Each whole language teacher implements the theories of whole language as he or she sees fit for a particular class. Therefore, each whole language classroom will be different. "There simply is no uniform set of practices

prescribed by whole language theory" (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991, 77). But, all whole language researchers agree that there are several common principles of language and language learning.

Most importantly, language is viewed as a whole and should be taught as such. When language is broken down into separate skills, the learner can neither appreciate nor comprehend it fully. The learner should experience language wholly before examining its components (Brockman, 1994). This is referred to as a "top-to-bottom" approach as opposed to a "bottom-up" method used in traditional approaches (Huerta-Macias, 1993).

In a whole language classroom, reading, writing, listening, and speaking are taught together, rather than in isolation (Rupp, 1986). According to Lamb and Best (1990), when a teacher integrates these skills, he or she maximizes learning time while exposing students to the many forms of language.

Whole language learning is based on real texts and real life experiences. Language is learned though usage, similar to the way a baby learns language. Students should learn by doing, not by practice and drill (Edelsky, Altwerger, Flores, 1991). This means that materials used are real. Basal readers are substituted for trade books. Writing is based on the students' personal experiences; it is not done solely to please the teacher. Also, the focus of writing class is on the writing process, not the product (Rigg, 1991).

Similarly, whole language learners and teachers focus on meaning and comprehension in language use. The expression of meaning is the most important goal of any language activity. Reading and writing is meaningful for a student who can connect it with his or her own experience. This is a motivating, purposeful, and ,therefore, positive experience for the learner. "Learners need to see a purpose in their activities, and it must be their purpose, not the teacher's" (Brockman, 1994, 11).

Another focus of whole language is on the social content of language; because whenever language is used, there is a sender of a message and a receiver. Texts are written to convey meaning to others. In the whole language classroom, learners socialize naturally as they do in the real world and are thus creating meaningful experiences (Brockman, 1994). Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores (1991) describe now meaning is conveyed socially through language:

> The meanings for texts . . . are not *in* the text or even *in* the language. Language can only mean what its community of users know -- the meanings users have attached to the experiences they have had. When the language community has new experiences . . . the range of potential meanings for the language (users) is expanded" (p. 10).

In this way, a whole language teacher acknowledges the importance of sharing language through socialization.

A final principle of whole language is the learner-centered environment. By incorporating the prior knowledge of students and focusing on their strengths, learning is centered around the student (Freeman &Freeman, 1988). In effect, the learners' previous and current experience guide the curriculum. The role of the whole language teacher is that of a facilitator or collaborator who guides the learner by providing an environment filled with language. When this concept is combined with the other principles of whole language, the result is a natural language learning process. Because of this, these theories of learning provide learners with skills to use in real life situations.

Applications for ESL

Whole language techniques help both children and adults learn a second language much in the same way they learned their first languages. Babies learn to use language by engaging in language and building on what they know. Their purpose

is to convey meaning (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). This is also the purpose in whole language, and research demonstrates that it is an effective and motivating approach for both children and adult ESL learners.

Heald-Taylor (1986) compiled a list of eight ways in which the whole approach can benefit ESL learners:

> "• youngsters can participate in all language activities regardless of their level of proficiency in English.
> • mixed ability groups can learn together.
> • learning strategies are child-centered, causing youngsters to continually experience and use language to think and to seek meaning.
> • development in oral language, reading, and writing are totally integrated and grow simultaneously.
> • rate of growth is completely individual.
> • the student uses his/her developing English in the reading and writing process right from the start.
> • students learn to speak, read, and write by being engaged in the process.
> • whole language processes facilitate growth in both first and second languages." (p. 3)

The whole language approach, therefore, is one that includes learners of varying ability, cultures, levels, and learning styles. As Brockman (1994) points out, ESL learners can comfortably practice using English in an environment that is welcoming and safe. The focus is on the meaning and knowledge that learners bring to the class, not on their lack of knowledge.

This focus is illustrated in several ESL and bilingual elementary classes. In her article, Rigg (1991) describes kindergarten and first grade classes in which students are composing texts and writing in dialogue journals even though they lack many structural skills. Students learn about language by hearing literature and actually writing. The teacher focuses on meaning in their writing, and the form eventually develops also. The students feel successful because they convey meaning and the teacher commends their efforts. Because of their success, they continue to write more.

Rupp (1986) shares his experiences with an elementary whole language ESL

program and describes several activities used daily. All the activities begin with a shared class experience and follow up with individual and small group reading and writing activities. This process allows students to work at their own level and pace "risk-free." They learn from working with peers, and they learn how to work with others. Time is included to confer with the teacher one-on-one to improve skills, and students learn language without fear of making mistakes.

Lamb and Best (1990) discuss several whole language activities during which children develop reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. By encouraging spontaneous conversations, teachers allow students to reinforce existing knowledge while learning new language from others. Ungraded dialogue journals provide a "non-threatening, comfortable environment in which to write" (p. 8). Students' writing portfolios provide a means of assessing progress in writing throughout the year. And through the portfolio, a teacher can continually evaluate not only writing development, but also students' use of the writing process.

In addition to these whole language activities, Rupp (1986) discusses in detail how the use of a Morning Message can act as a reading, writing, and speaking springboard for students of varying ability levels throughout the day. The Morning Message can begin as a whole or small group activity and can lead into activities reinforcing language skills. The content of the four or five line message is decided by the teacher; but what is important is that upon entering the classroom in the morning, students are immediately involved in using language.

In the elementary whole language classroom, it is important that the students have opportunities to share their writing. Writing conferences are one way for teachers and peers to provide personal feedback. Rupp (1986) also suggests encouraging students to publish their writing in their own books, class books, or school newspapers. A classroom library can include the student-made books giving them an authentic quality. Providing an audience for writers gives them a purpose for writing.

It is important to note that much research also demonstrates the effectiveness of the whole language approach in adult ESL classrooms. Brockman (1994) provides three practical reasons why the whole language approach is appropriate for adult learners. First, adult learners have an extensive bank of life experiences. This means that adult learners have much to write, read, and talk about. This is an advantage to adult learners in a classroom setting where students are asked to draw meaning from their background knowledge. Whole language philosophy says that "meaning is not something that a reader gets from the language; rather, the reader brings meaning to the language" (Brockman, 1994). Focusing on meaning means the whole language approach focuses on a strength of adult learners.

For this reason, a particularly successful teaching method is the Language Experience Approach (LEA). This whole language approach involves a student or class engaging in a real life experience and responding to it through writing and reading. The experience can be a personal one or a group experience in the classroom or community. The adult learners' vast experience is their resource from which they develop writing or conversation. A typical LEA lesson begins with the experience or stimulus and is followed by a discussion. Together, the class then writes an account of the experience, which they later read. The LEA integrates all four language skills and is successfully used with adult ESL learners (Taylor, 1993).

Brockman (1994) also believes that whole language is an attractive approach to adults for several reasons. First, adults who have been working for many years respond well to a classroom environment that asks them to actually do something. This is an atmosphere to which an adult is accustomed. Also, adults look for a purpose or usefulness in a lesson, as opposed to a child who performs simply because (s)he is told to perform. whole language activities are applicable to daily life. For example, an activity such as a dialogue journal promotes writing development through conversation, an everyday activity. This is motivating to and perceived as

postitive by adult learners (Brockman, 1994; Rigg, 1991).

Finally, the materials used in whole language are authentic, not contrived for the lesson. Authentic materials are appealing to adults because they know that they are challenges that they will eventually encounter in order to survive. Some examples are bus schedules, recipes, and news reports (Brockman, 1994).

Conclusion

No approach to teaching is foolproof, and whole language is no exception. In my research, however, I have seen that the strengths of the whole language approach are many. It has successfully created readers, writers, and language users in a variety of classroom environments. It has encouraged many to learn who did not learn successfully in more traditional settings. It also is motivating to young and adult learners of first and second languages.

Research and real life classrooms reveal this to us repeatedly. Whole language is unique:

> "The difference in approach makes a real difference in children's attitudes about reading. Gloria Norton, a teacher in a whole-language program at a bilingual school. . . asked children from different elementary schools what reading is. Children who were learning to read in traditional school ways thought that reading was 'answering questions,' 'working in workbooks,' 'sounding out words,' 'figuring out what the teacher wants.' But children from her school, who had been writing and reading their own stories, thought of reading as 'living in a world that the author creates.' " (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, 201)

It is important to remember that whole language is an approach to learning where the goal is for learners to bring meaning to the text. Whole language advocates believe that this focus on meaning is primary in language learning. In this way, the whole language approach successfully achieves its goal.

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